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Poems

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Abstract

A DEEP VERANDAH, ARGUMENT, MUDDLING BILL, MARMALADE

William Crapps 'Bushgrove' house, Central Tilba, 1907.

Paul Hetherington

A DEEP VERANDAH

Shadows linger on the deep verandah,
a woman shifts heavily in her chair,
puts down a needle, pours an icy drink
into a frosted glass. Her embroidery

lies on the weathered bricks, out of the heat.
This territory is governed by a law
unstated, resurrected every week
through rituals of family gatherings:

mother, father, brother, sister, aunt,
held in the long conundrum of their lives;
implicit truths that small explicit acts,
a hundred every day, still help define.

A family album lies upon the step,
snapshots haunting it of childhood –
that romantic, noisy world, that old domain
an undergrowth of early mystery

that parents do not ever fully reign –
but repeated stories make it sentiment.
The practised family rituals present
embroidered lives, needle-stitched and neat.

ARGUMENT

My cousin's words challenge stories that
have been recounted over thirty years:
she mocks the lie of this, the easy myths
used to mask old pain, allay old fears.

Beyond the house a cyprus starts to sigh,
a stiff breeze gusts, tugging flaps of bark,
and washing on the line drags awkwardly.
My aunt begins to cry. The air is dark.

Two hours of close recrimination later
nothing is altered, though all seems to have changed –
truth has found a way into the room
remorselessly, showing us estranged,

misunderstanding tainting all we do –
or perhaps repeated myths and masks might tell
that the generations leading to ourselves
loved argument, and argued much too well.

MUDDLING BILL

Related to a second cousin, he
arrived noisily in a battered car
every christmas, to join in the cooked meal
which, every christmas, was our 'necessity'

made from fifty small contrivances,
from English habit and inheritance.
Mostly sullen, he cursed his long-boned dog,
drank frothy beer in quick and pecking sips

looking constantly to left and right
but rarely talked, except to praise the food
or mutter about 'dark-dealing government'.
My mother called him 'Muddling Bill' and said

he was a miner, had always lived alone
and seemed to have no interests: 'He is
the least attractive man I've ever met.'
One year he stayed away. My father said:

'Someone has told him what we think of him',
and I was left to ponder how he lived,
whether his public, muddled self became
reconfigured in his private thought,

whether his nervous darting face looked on
a transfigured realm, where life and love were bold,
his dreams long explorations of rich thought,
a miner darkly chasing veins of gold.

MARMALADE

Thin, ascerbic, Aunt Nellie seemed
oldest of my relatives although
only in her thirties and barely lined.

Her eyes glinted with an irony
as bitter as her marmalade; she grew
wizened pears that held a fibrous juice

I could barely stomach. 'They will do
the world of good for all of you,' she said,
gesticulating with her bone-thin hands

at each of us in turn. And every month
we paid ten dollars for the clinking jars
unloaded from her basket made of cane

covered with a teatowel. I would try
to see what else she carried, if some prize
was tucked away that might show more of her

than wrinkled pears and jam. But even when
one day she left her basket in my sight
all I spied were rows of close-pushed lids

lined up just like the maxims she bestowed,
all 'good for us', that I will not repeat
for fear they harbour secret bitterness.